

# A New England Spinster Becomes Novel Heroine

"THE HORNBEAM TREE,"  
by Cid Ricketts Sumner: Bobbs-  
Merrill Co. \$3.50

Mrs. Sumner's novels always pose some social problem, such as race prejudice. However, her style and approach are nearer the women's magazine field than any taste of Steinbeck. In her new book she presents a common problem, faced by many middle-aged women whose lives suddenly become empty and bleak.

Miss Eva Iverson is a prosperous spinster who lives in a big, old-fashioned home on Boston's south shore. As the story opens, Miss Eva is alone at last. She has spent all her 50 years in pious and selfless servitude, first to her aging parents, and lately for an unwell brother who was slow in drinking himself to death.

But now Miss Eva finds the empty hours appalling, with a vacuum that nothing fills. At this point, her dry and colorless family lawyer comes down from Boston and suggests an answer. His young veteran relative is just released from service and needs a quiet place to get adjusted. Would she take him in?

Joe's arrival is a blaze of light in a dark world. A big blond Viking, handsome Joe was compounded half of Southern charm, and the other with qualities wrongly attributed to a fox. Treating Miss Eva with flattering respect, but as one of his own age, looking out for her every comfort (along with his own, which she didn't notice), teasing her and being always a merry and vigorous companion, it was no wonder that the poor lady found herself indecorously falling in love with a boy young enough to be her son. Naturally, she painfully resolved to keep this shameful emotion locked in her virtuous heart.

But all through the summer Miss Eva coddled and spoiled the willing Joe, who in a way became a somewhat better person from

such constant contact with a lady whose background and values were so alien to his. And when Miss Eva's innate honesty made her admit that the red-haired hoyden next door had something when she scornfully called Joe a "gigolo," she decides that she must give him up for this hateful girl. After all, sacrifice comes easy for a lady so used to it.

## A Shocking Lapse

Except for two major flaws, this is an excellent story. Miss Eva's character and problem are made believable, except for one lapse. A lady, who could not bear to see a pincushion out of place, would not throw away the rigid habits of a lifetime in one "fell swoop." "Things a lady never does" were held before her eyes from the day she was born. Miss Eva's virtue was as hard as a turtle's shell, and as unlikely to be shed. Mrs. Sumner's determination to keep in the swim of the boring conventionality that makes immorality a must in the modern novel, weakens her book and spoils all its artistry. It is an annoyingly shocking error.

The other flaw is the failure to do anything but smile at Joe's faults . . . his creator borrows Miss Eva's rose-colored glasses when she views his dishonesty, his promiscuity, and his lies. But stunning young Joe could find a girl on any limb, and there was only one Miss Eva. As the story works out, like a clam chowder without salt, a tree with a blight, it is a story that falls short of being a wryly amusing, artistic triumph. Possibly the author of this novel has not lived quite long enough, or consistently enough, in the shade of a New England hornbeam tree, to sense fully its tough Yankee resiliency. It is a thing of the bone and marrow, and a pretty boy with winning ways might bemuse, but never overwhelm, the lonely old maids in the old and empty houses.

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## Duxbury Novelist



### CID RICKETTS SUMNER

Cid Ricketts Sumner, who lives in the red house on Sunpluse St., will return in mid-October from an 11-month holiday in Europe, where she revised her latest novel, **THE HORNBEAM TREE**. Publication date is Sept. 21 and orders are now being taken at Westwind Bookshop.

The hornbeam tree of the title can be seen through the large picture window of her Duxbury house. (There are other hornbeam trees on Hornbeam Rd., Harden Hill). Mrs. Sumner has written numerous short stories besides her six novels, four of which have been book club selections. Her novels in order are Ann Singleton (first published in the Women's Home Companion), Quality (first appeared as a one-shot in the Ladies Home Journal), Tammy Out of Time (which she and Al Moritz adapted as a musical play at the old Duxbury Playhouse), But The Morning Will Come, Sudden Glory and The Hornbeam Tree.

Quality, which was filmed as "Pinky," has been translated into Dutch and French and has ap-

peared in British and Australian editions, as well as American.

Mrs. Sumner, who is a native of Jackson, Miss., told the Clipper she had no reason for settling in Duxbury, "except that it is the loveliest town I have ever seen in the U. S." Her hobbies are horse-back riding, not playing canasta, making unusual bread, writing poetry and making dresses out of cheesecloth and bedspreads. Are these dresses lovely?

They are when she is in them.

# Bookstall Gossip

Cid Ricketts Sumner is a Mississippi lady by birth, but now makes her sometime-home in a little old house on Boston's south shore, where she lets the timothy, daisies, and goldrenrod run riot to her very door. It is typical of her cosmopolitan existence, however, that her newest novel was written in Falls Church, Va.; worked on in Duxbury, Mass., and finished in the Austrian Tyrol. Mrs. Sumner was educated in the South, earned her M.A. at Columbia University, and took two years of graduate work there and another at Cornell University. At one time she embarked on the career of a doctor (this was her husband's profession), but domesticity, and later on her writing, held her down. Her favorite hobbies in this era are her six grandchildren. She hasn't had a new photograph of her nice looking self taken in a dozen years, so we can't introduce her to you. We have six Cid Ricketts in our picture file; all identical with the one on the dust jacket.

Until "The Hornbeam Tree" was completed, all of Mrs. Sumner's novels were laid in the deep South. Movie fans know her first novel, "Quality," that turned into "Pinky" on the screen. "Tammy Out of Time" got herself out to Hollywood, too. Our favorite Sumner novel is "Sudden Glory," published a year or two ago; it is a strong and wise treatment of a Southern problem. Mrs. Sumner explains why she wrote "The Hornbeam Tree" in this way: "I've known a lot of lone women living in large houses, especially in New England, and I got to thinking about them, their lives and age coming on."

She certainly has something there. The famous N. E. conscience, plus a sense of duty so strong that it crushes the ego, has made such life-long sacrifices a common picture hereabouts. It's not that Southerners have a quaint old custom of tossing their old people into

handy cotton or tobacco fields. ("Ah have lived in this tobacco patch nigh on 40 years," moans poor old Pa); but taking care of difficult old Mama—or rheumatic Aunt Lizzie—is not the conspicuous profession in Kentucky that it is in Massachusetts. Aged maiden ladies never seem to rattle around huge, empty gingerbread castles, south of the Mason Dixon line—we can't think why this is so. Maybe Miss Eva Battles has just up and gone some place else.

Ask any average person, even on the south shore, what a hornbeam tree is, and he is stuck. However, this thorny word is on many tongues down in Duxbury, and Mrs. Sumner makes no secret of the fact that her novel is about this charming seaside town. The new Oxford dictionary defines the hornbeam as "any of a group of small, hardy trees of the birch family, with smooth bark and large clusters of pale green nuts." It goes on to say that the very hard wood takes on a hornlike polish, and is sometimes known as ironwood. Cid Rickett's Miss Eva Iveson was uncommonly fond of her hornbeam tree, which was a symbol of her unyielding life pattern. Once she tested its iron qualities when by mistake she drove the Ford smack into it, and it just brushed her off.

Be that as it may, no Duxburyite can go to LaFleur's or Josselyn's General Stores, or to the postoffice of a morning, without hearing somebody ask, "What page of 'The Hornbeam Tree' am I on?" or "After Peggy finishes reading it, can I have it next?" Letters of praise or protests are published in The Duxbury Clipper. (Mrs. Sumner's travels, her books, her six grandchildren, their parents, and all the relatives that come, part and parcel, to visit her by the sea, keep the social and literary columns of the village paper pretty well stuffed all the time.) Meanwhile, Duxbury's few real hornbeam trees, they don't say nothin', they just go on making large clusters of pale-green nuts.